



A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars

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When Patrick Buchanan took the stage at the Republican National Convention in 1992 and proclaimed, “There is a religious war going on for the soul of our country,” his audience knew what he was talking about: the culture wars, which had raged throughout the previous decade and would continue until the century’s end, pitting conservative and religious Americans against their liberal, secular fellow citizens. It was an era marked by polarization and posturing fueled by deep-rooted anger and insecurity.

Buchanan’s fiery speech marked a high point in the culture wars, but as Andrew Hartman shows in this richly analytical history, their roots lay farther back, in the tumult of the 1960s—and their significance is much greater than generally assumed. Far more than a mere sideshow or shouting match, the culture wars, Hartman argues, were the very public face of America’s struggle over the unprecedented social changes of the period, as the cluster of social norms that had long governed American life began to give way to a new openness to different ideas, identities, and articulations of what it meant to be an American. The hot-button issues like abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, feminism, and homosexuality that dominated politics in the period were symptoms of the larger struggle, as conservative Americans slowly began to acknowledge—if initially through rejection—many fundamental transformations of American life.

As an ever-more partisan but also an ever-more diverse and accepting America continues to find its way in a changing world, *A War for the Soul of America* reminds us of how we got here, and what all the shouting has really been about.

A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars Details

Date : Published April 14th 2015 by University of Chicago Press

ISBN : 9780226254500

Author : Andrew Hartman

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : History, Politics, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Cultural

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Tom says

A history of the Culture Wars, and their lingering effects.

The book closes a bit prematurely, with the "conclusion" hinting at where we are now - a Capitalism that has triumphed over both conservative and liberal worlds, perhaps, in my own words, putting a price on everything, thus reducing everything, every idea, to a commodity. I hope Mr. Hartman is at work on another book.

But if you're not clear about the Culture Wars and their devastating impact on our nation, this is a very good read. It helps to know that the issues of the "day" have long roots, often reaching into the most bitter of deadly soils. It's clear that our soul has been a divided one, and it remains to be seen where and how we'll find a way to be one America, and not two, or even more, as we seem to be fragmenting at an alarming rate.

For me, a bit sad.

I'm a liberal, and it would seem that we liberals have been bested and outfoxed on nearly every front, even as we liberals seem more than happy going after one another, even as we continue to combat the conservative juggernaut.

Yet, I believe an FDR Liberalism holds great promise for America ... a liberalism of justice and inclusion.

A liberalism that requires some thinking about our history, our identity, our values, as contrary to conservatism with its pious platitudes, its clear and terrible enemies, offering an America, not of the future, but of the past, with a promise, that if we recover what has been lost, indeed, what has been stolen by liberal Marxist, socialist, secularism, we'll once again be great.

Of course, no definition of greatness is offered, but only hinted at, and the hints are enough to sicken me, and these days, some of the outworkings of it all present, at least to me, a hideous specter devouring our nation.

Pamela Burdick says

This beautifully written and well researched book offers something for everyone.

The chapter "The Trouble with Gender" is fascinating and I believe the first half of the chapter would make excellent required reading in high school explaining how men and women have arrived in their current state regarding gender conversations.

Personally, I recently found myself in you another conversation where the woman I spoke with prefaced her statement with "I am not a feminist but...." This statement floors me every time I hear it, as feminism by definition is the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.

I have never heard another group state they are not for their own equal rights prior to making a statement on their own behalf. The author stating fascinating references explains how we, as a society, have reached this confusing state of affairs.

Throughout approximately 60 years of history this book shows how we view our own history including belief about race, gender, pornography, nuclear war, film, entertainment and more, and how these views have created a framework for American culture.

The question remains, are we learning our history or are we reacting to a well marketed plan by groups with an agenda, and do we have the fortitude to look for the answer? The author has done his research and allows us to ponder the answers. This is an excellent read.

Oliver Bateman says

A fine overview of the culture wars and a good companion to Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion*. Hartman, who founded the excellent USIH blog, credits its many contributors throughout the work and provides a good example of how digital collaboration can shape the development of a manuscript.

That said, this remains a cool title, some good info, and a starting point. I'm not an expert on everything described in the book, but I'd say I've read and watched as much of Pat Buchanan's work as anyone currently living, including Pat Buchanan...and he's a thing unto himself, but here he gets about as many pages as Allan Bloom, whose impact was comparatively much slighter.

Hartman also does the thing that we all do when writing about the living and nearly-dead: like Wilentz in *The Age of Reagan*, he provides odd little post hoc judgments on the quality of this or that piece of rhetoric that recall the curious judgmental treatments of the Carrs, Actons, et al.

But that's just some hairsplitting. This is a great work, and could even conceivably be assigned to upper-level undergrads (particularly if supplemented in class with YouTube clips, primary source readings, etc.).

Kari says

After reading this, I have a new understanding of the battles fought between professors on my senior thesis committee, not to mention different family arguments I recall from childhood. Hartman takes care to present a fairly well-balanced perspective from both sides of the "war," which I especially appreciate.

Lorraine says

Read this. Read this. Read this. It's been getting lots of attention academically, and no wonder. So many books on the cultural wars focus on the 80's and 90's, but this book actually traces its roots back to the 60s. Particularly of interest is the alliance between neoconservatives and religious conservatives against the left. Many of the neocons were Jewish (children of Jewish immigrants) and that in itself is significant, for the American Dream and the maintenance thereof (compare this to Arendt's *We Refugees*). Here we see how the 'traditional heartland' Americans moved right, from the New Deal era, how the word 'liberal' came to be

associated with the American left.

We also can see how the neocons have turned, more or less, into the libertarians of the day, and even infected the 'liberal left' with its intellectual stances, pushing many apparently clever people right. The neocons, according to Hartman (with luminaries from top schools in America), helped to provide an intellectual articulation of why the revolutions in the 60s were bad -- cultural conservatism.

Hartman goes on to trace, competently, how this schism continues through to today, while continuing to fracture within itself (eg the fractures within the left now). The fractures within the right (neocon vs religious con) are now less obvious I think, due to political reasons -- neocons are less overtly socially conservative than religious conservatives -- given that both parties are right-wing now (just a matter of degree) the liberal right has cause to ally with the liberal left. In fact, we see on the ground a dissatisfaction from the liberal right, that it has lost its 'home' of sorts -- it needs to vote for the Democrat party but hates many of its fellow voters. I wish he had written more about today's politics, but there's a second edition coming out soon that deals with that (this was published in 2015, guess what big news issue was missing?).

My only quibble is that Hartman has not given post-structuralism, in my view, a completely fair hearing, though most of what he says I would broadly agree. I am also not sure of his parsing of Jameson. But this is just quibbling -- he has had a huge amount of material to work through -- including seminal court cases and etc -- and I have my own readings of the theoretical material being of the literary persuasion.

Lastly, I'm not sure what school of history Hartman hails from, but a warning note for those who might want to feel offended: Hartman is clearly "liberal left" and isn't afraid to show it. It shows in his adjectives! He doesn't like identity politics either, and at some level is an old skool humanist of the left persuasion (hence, a palpable dislike of deconstruction and etc). That's all fine and good, but warning people who might be #triggered.

Brian Morris says

This is a pretty good recounting of the Culture Wars that have been raging ever since the Civil Rights movement. But I thought it focused a little too much on the battles fought between intellectuals in their ivory towers. I would have liked to have learned more about how it was experienced on the front lines. I was also surprised that the book didn't say much about 21st Century developments.

Elbrozzie says

Brilliant, really! A lot to take in; and, as a consequence, a lot learned.

Rj says

A really good analysis of how the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s developed over time. An important book for anyone interested in the period and how the neo-conservative movement developed. Would make a great teaching tool for anyone wanting to unravel how politics divided after the 1960s.

"But the sixties universalized fracture. Many Americans prior to the sixties, particularly middle-class white Americans, were largely sheltered from the "acids of modernity," those modern ways of thinking that subjected seemingly timeless truths, including truths about America, to a lens of suspicion." 4

"The New Left was younger and more affluent than any American left before or since. This was particularly true of the hundreds of thousands of young white Americans who, inspired by the civil rights movement and radicalized by the Vietnam War, committed themselves to leftist action of one sort or another." 11

"Black Power and the other identity-based movements of the sixties underscored new forms of knowledge, a new intellectual agency in relation to oppression that might be termed an epistemology of liberation." 21

"When we think about the neoconservative persuasion as the flip side of the New Left, it should be historically situated relative to what Corey Robin labels "the reactionary mind." 38

"Crime was another issue that aligned the neoconservative imagination with white-working class sensibilities. Irving Kristol famously quipped that a neoconservative is "a liberal who has been mugged by reality." 64

"That evangelicals have tended to mix their religious and national identities has long tinged the rhetoric of American cultural politics with an eschatological hue." 71

"Indeed, disentangling the Christian Right's moral panic from white racial panic is no easy task." 85

"In short, AIDS motivated both sides of the culture wars over homosexuality. Religious conservatives saw AIDS as a chance to intensify their backlash against gay liberation. But gay rights activists worked overtime to deny Christian Right efforts to make them into pariahs." 159

"In 1988 Koop sent an eight-page condensed version of the report to every household in America 107 million in total, the largest single mailing in American history. Thanks in no small part to Koop's efforts, Reagan finally spoke publicly about AIDS on May 31, 1987. By then 36,058 Americans had been diagnosed with AIDS, and 20,849 had died of the horrible disease." 160

"Even after the conservative movement had long captured the Republican Party, and even after a conservative Republican Party had controlled the White House for twelve years, right-wing culture warriors were insecure about their power. The national culture-art, music, film, and television-seemed to have slipped from their hands, signaling that the America of the conservative imagination was dead or dying." 199

"A 1983 NEA pamphlet exemplified this gentler approach: "As Americans, we have a unique opportunity to celebrate people, for our borders are filled with a precious assortment of cultures, each one contributing to history and seeking appreciation." The new name for this curriculum was "multiculturalism." ...But since multiculturalism was more about representing diversity than about challenging institutional hierarchy, it appealed to a wider array of teachers and allowed it to become the implicit ethos of national curriculum." 202-203

"Rather than transform the American political system, the Left "marched on the English department while the right took the White House," as Todd Gitlin put it with his pithy metaphor for academic solipism in the face of conservative triumph." 223

"Whether it be Nuremberg or Woodstock," he proclaimed, "the principle is the same." Weimar analogies

were particularly a fetish of those, like Bloom who had studied with German emigre Leo Strauss..." 233

"By the late 1980s deconstruction had become a generic if pretentious signifier for much of what went for academic inquiry. In the words of one critic, it was "the squiggle of fancy French mustard on the hot dog of banal observations." 239

"As Gertrude Himmelfarb eulogized: "The beasts of modernism have mutated into the beasts of postmodernism-relativism into nihilism, amorality into immorality, irrationality into insanity, sexual deviancy into polymorphous perversity." 250

"Fracture, whether political, in the form of identity politics, or epistemological, in the form of postmodernism, was not liberating. Rather, it was a product of political reaction. Whereas the modern era of capitalism ushered in mass movements that made the world a better place, the postmodern era brought atomization that saw the weakening or even dissolution of such working-class cohesion. (Jameson):" 251

"Can we have both cultural revolution and social democracy? This is a serious dilemma with no easy answers. One thing seems certain, however. The reigning American economic ideology-the belief in the goodness of capitalism-makes cultural revolution much likelier than social democracy....it has become increasingly clear that capitalism has done more than the state to pitilessly destroy the values they held dear. Capitalism, more than the federal government-Mammon more than Leviathan-has rendered traditional family values passe." 290

Carol says

Comprehensive and meaningful analysis of the topic of culture wars in the United States. Andrew Hartman traces the origins of the divide of the American populace to the upheaval and strife of the 1960's, when so many previously subjugated groups fought for identity and justice. Their demands and the increasingly radicalized tone that accompanied them caused other Americans to yearn for what had once been their normality in the homogenized fifties. Hartman includes the voices of some of the most prominent spokespersons for each movement. Although I lived through the times and have many anecdotal recollections of what transpired, this historical and sociological perspective helped me refine my understanding of the polarization that now grips our society.

B. Tyler Burton says

Great play by play of events that for me rang bells of foggy memory, but there is nothing like reading the words of those involved at the scene. Like when Reagan on the campaign trail for governor said he'd love to get to know those Berkeley protestors "...with a club"

The last fifty years of Bay Area politics plays heavily into the narrative which is also a plus.

Heavily recommended for those who are students of history.

Alex Stroshine says

"A War For the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars" by Andrew Hartman offers a sweeping account of a changing America. Hartman effectively demonstrates how the 1960s laid the groundwork for America's divisive culture wars, tackling topics such as feminism, education, religion and race.

Hartman's book is well-researched and ranging. He highlights interesting twists in the theatres of the culture wars, such as how Andrea Dworkin and other feminist opponents of pornography found themselves in alliances with conservative Christians, how feminists came to debate what exactly was meant by sex and gender and how scholars and politicians had similar disputes about race and poverty. Hartman is also astute in pointing out divisions within the Right and the Left, such as on page 238 where he writes, "On the one hand was an academic Left interested in either identity politics or theories that delegitimize universal claims to truth. On the other hand was a political Left that believed their causes were better served when grounded in universal assertions about justice and human agency." Hartman is attentive to how both the counterculture and mainstream media (which gradually acquired counterculture values) such as "Maude" helped to promulgate more relaxed ideas about feminism and sexuality.

Hartman's own liberal convictions occasionally come out in the book. Sometimes I wonder if the term "anti-feminism" is used too broadly, especially given that there are dozens of different types of feminism and that some of those who oppose more liberal notions of feminism in favour of "traditional" gender norms aren't necessarily "anti-feminist." At the same time, Hartman shies away from some of the extreme conservative figures, such as the widely-derided revisionist historian David Barton and I am grateful for that as Hartman thus attempts to focus primarily on the mainstream Left and Right.

Although similar to Daniel T. Rodgers "Age of Fracture," Hartman's book is more readable (mercifully, it lacks Rodgers' excruciatingly boring chapter on the economy). While "A War For the Soul of America" has a lot of content, one wonders why it seemingly ends at the end of the 20th century - surely the first 15 years of the 21st century could have also be included, particularly in light of such rapid changes such as the legalization of same-sex marriage. But all-in-all, this is a fine tome that will aid those interested in exploring how America changed culturally over the last half of the 20th century. Highly recommended.

Osbert says

I always thought that the so-called War on Terror was a distraction from the ruinous culture wars engulfing the United States. The psychiatrist and author Jay Lifton identifies the post-911 world as America's "superpower syndrome", a development that fed the "apocalyptic entity" that the nation turned into under the Bush administration. The War on Terror and the war in Iraq did nothing to unify the country - the United States' real war is for the very soul of the country. The American-led interventions overseas in the last few decades were mere diversions from the war at home. The United States of America is an Enlightenment experiment. It is an experiment that will likely fail.

The American Christian Right was incubated in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a reaction against the forces of liberalisation and the anti-establishment counter-culture. The belief that the United States' moral fabric was decaying in the post-Civil Rights era, besieged by bra-burning feminists, militant blacks, and dangerous left-wing liberals, is the fire that fueled the phenomenon of the Christian Right in the 1980s. It is clear now that the Civil Rights Act didn't make the United States a more harmonious society - it merely

suppressed deep-seated tensions for a generation or two. That is all that the passing of the Civil Rights Act did. Nothing more than that.

Andrew Hartman is right to use the word "war" in his title - it is spiritual warfare in a very real sense. The British writer and TV presenter Sandi Toksvig said recently: "I've just been in the United States and it felt like there was violence in the air. It was horrible." I doubt she's wrong. The deeper problem with the U.S. is that the education system is producing people who aren't well-versed enough in the subtleties of deep thought to understand the complexity of our modern moment. Both liberals and Christian conservatives depend more on the self-congratulatory and cathartic fervour of emotionalism than on the less immediately rewarding exercise of critical thinking. The United States of America's crises are ahead of her.

Cedric says

I read this book because it was a required reading assignment. I normally like to read about history. Being a Libertarian, I really did not like reading this book. From my point of view, this book outlines pretty much everything that the government and politics should not be involved in. That being said, you could make the argument that the culture wars in America did lead to everyone being a little more equal than they were when the Declaration of Independence was written.

The American Conservative says

Just a decade ago, intellectual history was considered an outmoded sub-field of history. The long decline of intellectual history was the result of a deliberate effort by a generation of social historians to push it from the halls of academia—to banish the unfashionable emphasis on the ideas of preeminent Western thinkers. Classifications such as race, class, and gender replaced the study of history as ideas.

By the 1980s, “social history” had morphed into “cultural history,” which borrowed its approach from a host of mid-20th-century anthropologists more interested in symbolism and language than in social structures. But then cultural history struggled to lay firm foundations for the historical profession, as challenges to cultural anthropology became legion by the early 1990s. Gradually, cultural history lost its vogue, as many self-styled “culturalists” began publishing works that mirrored the intellectual histories their dissertation advisors sought to displace decades ago.

<http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

Thomas Christianson says

A fascinating and fairly academic look at the history of the culture war which seems to rage hotter in our society every year.
